

Lifted Up  
Isaiah 40:21-31  
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Did you see the movie "Signs?" It stars Mel Gibson as a priest who lost his wife in a car accident and then lost his faith, as well. He and his three kids live on a farm, and one morning a crop circle appears in his fields, which we learn were caused by alien spacecraft. As Gibson contemplates what this could mean, he has this fascinating conversation with his oldest son about fate and uncertainty. I want to share with you a rather long quote from Gibson's character and I want you think about it in terms of how you make sense of the good and bad things that happen your life. When something good or bad happens, how do you explain it? Gibson says:

*People break down into two groups. When they experience something lucky, group number one sees it as more than luck, more than coincidence. They see it as a sign, evidence, that there is someone up there, watching out for them. Group number two sees it as just pure luck. Just a happy turn of chance. I'm sure the people in group number two are looking at those fourteen lights in a very suspicious way. For them, the situation is a fifty-fifty. Could be bad, could be good. But deep down, they feel that whatever happens, they're on their own. And that fills them with fear. Yeah, there are those people. But there's a whole lot of people in group number one. When they see those fourteen lights, they're looking at a miracle. And deep down, they feel that whatever's going to happen, there will be someone there to help them. And that fills them with hope. See what you have to ask yourself is what kind of person are you? Are you the kind that sees signs, that sees miracles? Or do you believe that people just get lucky? Or, look at the question this way: Is it possible that there are no coincidences?*

Talk about a great question! It's one I believe we all wrestle with at some point in our lives. Why do things happen the way they do? Is this part of God's plan or just luck? You know, the Greeks believed in the Fates, women who sat at their spinning wheels in heaven, each spinning a person's life thread, and when the thread broke, the person died. Can we chalk up the circumstances in our lives, the good and the bad, to things like fate or luck or coincidence? Or is there something more?

I believe Isaiah in our passage today Isaiah was helping the Israelites think through this very question. At the time of Isaiah's prophecy, the Israelites were aliens. Not the outer space kind, but the exiled kind. Babylon had invaded Israel, ransacked the nation, and taken its people as prisoners back to Israel, where they remained for a generation. So the people to whom Isaiah was speaking had only known captivity their whole lives, the despair of yearning for a homeland you've never known. Psalm 137 says: By the rivers of Babylon we sat and wept when we remembered Zion. There on the poplars we hung our harps, for there our captors asked us for songs, our tormentors demanded songs of joy; they said, "Sing us one of the songs of Zion!" How can we sing the songs of the LORD while in a foreign land?

Sometimes it feels like we are living in a foreign land, doesn't it? Sure, we're still residents of the good old US of A, but things are changing so fast around us that

sometimes I barely even recognize it. At our youth Super Bowl party I was watching some of the boys play a video game and I realized for the first time in my life I had no idea what was going on in the game. I grew up with video games and now they are so sophisticated they've passed me by. What happened to Pacman?

Seriously, our life changes in ways we least expect or can predict. Technology blows past us, our bodies begin to fail us, our trusted institutions begin to falter, and all of a sudden we're trying to sing a song in the foreign land of a hospital room or a funeral home or a loan office. What happened to our comfortable home land? How did we get here?

And more importantly, where is God? Isaiah warns the captive Israelites against mouthing complaints like, "My way is hidden from the Lord; my cause is disregarded by my God." In other words, "Hello? God, remember me? You may not have noticed, but things aren't so great here. This wasn't what I signed up for. Hello? Anyone there?"

Isaiah's words today are a reminder to the Israelites and to us that someone is there. He says, "Do you not know? Have you not heard? The Lord is an everlasting God." Or as The Message translates it, "God doesn't come and go. God lasts." Through the capriciousness of life, through the good and bad events, through the so-called coincidences and twists of fate, God lasts.

To help the Israelites remember this, Isaiah gives them some of God's resume. "He sits enthroned above the circle of the earth. He stretches out the heavens like a canopy." This would have been a big deal to the Israelites, because in the land of Babylon where they were living, the celestial bodies were worshipped. The stars weren't just glowing balls of hydrogen; they were gods. But the Israelite God points to the stars and says, "See those things you worship? I put those there."

In fact, if you read this text the wrong way, God could come across as a bit arrogant. At one point God seems to challenge the Israelites by saying, "To whom will you compare me? Or who is my equal?" Well, when you put it that way, I guess no one is. It reminds of me Ron Burgundy in "Anchorman" when he says, "I don't know how to put this, but I'm kind of a big deal. People know me." That will be the last time I compare God with Ron Burgundy!

I don't think arrogance is what God is going for here. To be honest, considering the Israelites' current plight, they may not be too impressed with God. They may take up his challenge and say, "Well, since we've been in captivity for a few decades, I would say Nebuchadnezzar, the Babylonian ruler, is your equal. Or maybe Marduk, the Babylonian deity, is your equal. At least they are around. Where are you?"

But I don't hear God's statement as a "make my day" challenge. I hear it as an invitation. "Give it a try. Engage in dialogue. Do some soul-searching. Get to know me and see if you kind find someone as equal in compassion, in mercy, in love." Nebuchadnezzar and Marduk and cancer and addiction and life come and go, but God lasts. Don't let your present circumstances make you think that God cannot see you. You may be far from home, you may be in a place you don't want to be, but God is present with you. And if we are willing, God can help us run and not grow weary and walk and not grow faint.

But in order to soar on wings of eagles, we have to realize our need to be lifted up. The paradox of faith is that to be strong, we must be weak. To soar we must stumble. When our last resource is tapped, then we are ready to rely on God's resources. To be

saved, we must see our need for a savior. The more we try to be stubbornly self-reliant, the more we give in to the persistent human temptation to believe we are God's equal, that we know better, the less we are able to see God at work in and around us.

Isaiah doesn't provide easy answers here. He's not trying to solve the Israelites' problems with three points and a poem. He's not into solutions; he's into experience. He's encouraging the Israelites to embrace the mystery of God as something bigger and grander than we can ever comprehend, and to let that mystery provide the wind for the sails in our souls or provide the melody for their hearts that would encourage them sing a song of joy in a foreign land.

I can't blame the Israelites for being less than model believers. Can you relate to where they were? They were far from home, physically and spiritually, and their old religion wasn't working. The answers didn't cut it anymore. God did not seem present. Doubts crept in. Their faith had serious holes in it. They felt like they were sinking.

But look at the stars! Look at the earth! Look at your friends and family! Look at your church! Look at your house! Look at your car! Look at your blessings! Where did those things come from? Was that just coincidence? Dumb luck? Or is it evidence, a sign, of someone greater at work?

Remember that first group of people Mel Gibson described? "Deep down, they feel that whatever's going to happen, there will be someone there to help them. And that fills them with hope. What you have to ask yourself is what kind of person are you? Are you the kind that sees signs, that sees miracles? Or do you believe that people just get lucky?" When I think about my life, when I look at you, when I stop a minute to take a deep breath, I know what I believe.